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THE DETROIT MUSEUM OF ART

POPULARIZING ART

A MOVEMENT INAUGURATED BY MR. A. H. GRIFFITH, DIRECTOR
OF THE DETROIT MUSEUM OF ART

BY MINNIE CAGE

ONE Sunday afternoon, about eighteen years ago, Mr. A. H. Griffith, Director of the Detroit Museum of Art, making a tour of the museum, observed a little knot of visitors intently examining a case of beautiful bronze figurines. Stepping up to the case he unlocked it, and holding up to view two of the most exquisite, told their histories in an informal manner, giving many interesting facts not set forth on the necessarily meager labels. As he chatted about the customs and everyday lives of the peasant-artists of Nuremberg who executed

these truly remarkable works of art, about the art sense "bred in the bone" of these people, and a hundred others things to which his auditors listened with rapt attention, he had no idea that this little impromptu talk would lead to the establishment of the popular Sunday afternoon lectures on art topics which have exerted so wide an influence in Detroit, nor did he foresee that he was to become in this way the pioneer in a widespread movement for the popularizing of art.

The following Sunday he noticed the same group of people gathered about an-

other case, and he gave them a talk on the specimens contained in it. Others drew near to listen, and so great was the interest evidenced that Mr. Griffith said he would talk again the next Sunday "if they cared to hear." During the week, however, he gave the matter no thought, and when Sunday came selected a case at random. He was amazed at the size of the crowd that collected around him. The next Sunday and the next people arrived in ever-increasing numbers, and he began to devote some time to the preparation of his subject. Soon his audience filled the entire outer court of the museum, as there was no auditorium at that time, and the enthusiasm was so great that they gladly stood.

Finally, Mr. Griffith procured four hundred chairs, and announced that as long as people "cared to come" he would talk every Sunday afternoon in the big gallery. He thought that the talks were only a fad, and that the interest in them would soon wane. But it was not long before the gallery proved inadequate, the stairways were crowded, people stood in the balconies and an auditorium became an urgent necessity.

Mr. Griffith has given a course of twenty-five lectures every winter for seventeen years, four hundred and twenty-five talks. The auditorium seats one thousand persons. And yet, every Sunday an average of fifteen hundred are turned away. The doors are opened at two o'clock, and by half-past one a waiting line extends to the street.

The success of these lectures is largely due to the lecturer, whose aim from the first has been to reach "the man in the street," to create a general interest in art, and to educate the public taste.

In order to attract the public and to grip the attention of his audience Mr. Griffith makes his talks replete with "human interest." For instance when lecturing on a great painter, he does not dwell on his "technique"; in describing his paintings he does not employ terms meaningless to the average listener; he pictures the time in which the artist lived and the conditions under which he worked; he tells about his loves and friendships and

the influences that shaped his art, all the intimate things that he can discover about the artist's life which help to make of the man of genius a real flesh-and-blood person with whose hopes and fears, joys and sorrows every one in the audience can sympathize. And, when this sympathy is established, he points out with the aid of stereopticon slides the beauties of the artist's works. In this way they are indelibly impressed upon the minds of his audience, who are immensely entertained and incidentally acquire considerable information.

The charm of these Sunday afternoon lectures lies in their freshness and vivacity and the effect of spontaneity which may be partly accounted for by Mr. Griffith's vivid imagination and his intuitive faculty of selecting those subjects and incidents that appeal to the popular fancy. A factor no less important, however, is his almost inexhaustible fund of information and personal experiences which lend infinite variety. For many years Mr. Griffith has been a "genteel tramp," as he expresses it, having traveled in almost every country in the world. In every land that he has visited he has made a study of the native art of the people.

Mr. Griffith does not confine his talks to art in its narrowest sense. Many take the form of travelogues, but the predominating idea is always the art of the people.

Those who crowd the auditorium every Sunday afternoon, arriving from half an hour to an hour before the time set for the lecture and standing in a biting wind, shivering, with blue lips, waiting for the doors to open, are people who, in all likelihood, will never have an opportunity of viewing the beautiful scenes and the wonderful works of art which Mr. Griffith describes. The girl who stands behind a counter all the week, selling "notions," the stenographer whose only "home" is a hall bedroom in a dingy boarding house, the bookkeeper, weary from the monotonous routine of his daily work, all those whose starved lives are denied participation in the beautiful things of this world, find here, for a brief two hours each week, that for which they hunger. Is it any



CROWD ASSEMBLED IN FRONT OF THE MUSEUM AWAITING THE OPENING OF THE DOORS ON ONE OF THE WORST SUNDAYS
OF THE WINTER OF 1910

wonder that these talks have become "popular"?

If one were to follow closely a course of these lectures a well-defined, underlying purpose to cultivate in the masses an esthetic taste would be discovered. As the taste of a people is shown in their homes, Mr. Griffith devotes many talks to home decoration, the selection of pictures, rugs, bric-à-brac, wall papers and furniture, and never neglects an opportunity to make a suggestion, incidentally, along these lines, even when the topic of his lecture is seemingly far removed from the subject.

That his persistent efforts to discourage the buying of chromos, "loud" wall paper and garish rugs are proving effectual was demonstrated by an incident which occurred recently. Passing a furniture establishment Mr. Griffith noticed in the window some rugs showing in their design pictorial representations of dogs and peacocks which he wished to photograph to illustrate a lecture. Offering to pay for the use of them he requested them,

but the dealer refused, saying "I will sell them to you, but I will not loan them. You have already hurt my trade enough. I have no longer any call for these things and cannot get rid of them."

Actuated by a desire to foster in the youth of Detroit a love of the beautiful, and to develop an appreciation of art among those of the younger generation, Mr. Griffith has devised a novel system which is producing very gratifying results. He has offered his services to the schools of the city, and hardly a week passes during the school term that he does not give at least four or five talks to school children. If a class is studying Holland, for instance, the teacher, by special arrangement with Mr. Griffith, takes the pupils to the museum where a lecture on the Dutch people, their country, customs, and art, is given for them by the Director. As one boy expressed it, "Why, this isn't study at all." And yet, a lasting impression is made upon their minds, and an impulse given toward an appreciation of art.